

Othello: Consumed by the Green-Eyed Monster

False jealousy, emotional blindness, and the destruction of love



Two Tragic Forms of Blindness

Oedipus blinds himself only after discovering the terrible truth about his life. Othello's tragedy begins because he is already blind - not physically, but emotionally. He cannot see Desdemona's loyalty, his own worthiness of her love, or the malice behind Iago's apparent friendship. Oedipus is destroyed by a truth he insists upon uncovering; Othello is destroyed by a lie he chooses to believe. Both men possess courage, power, and intelligence, yet each suffers from a blindness that turns love into catastrophe and brings a great man to ruin.

The Man Who Had Everything

Othello is noble, famous, and highly regarded by Venice's rulers. He has achieved distinction as a military commander and married Desdemona, who loves him without reservation.

Yet beneath that success lies a profound insecurity. Othello cannot fully believe that a beautiful young Venetian woman could truly love him. That doubt provides fertile ground for Iago, who transforms Othello's weakness into an irrational jealousy powerful enough to destroy everything he values - including Desdemona and himself.

Jealousy Begins With Iago

Othello is not the play's only jealous man. As early as the first act, Iago suspects that Othello has slept with Emilia:

*"I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office."*

Iago possesses no proof, but proof is unnecessary. The suspicion "will do as if for surety."

That is the pattern jealousy follows throughout the play. Possibility becomes probability, probability becomes certainty, and imagined betrayal becomes sufficient justification for revenge.

Iago announces his intention plainly:

*"And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife;
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure."*

A Monster That Feeds Itself

Iago understands Othello's vulnerability and changes his perception of Desdemona with remarkable speed. He does not need to prove that she has been unfaithful. He merely supplies suggestions and allows Othello's insecurity to do the rest.

With supreme hypocrisy, Iago warns him:

*"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on."*

The image echoes later when Emilia explains that jealous people do not require a genuine cause:

*"They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself."*

Desdemona responds with tragic innocence: "Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind!"

The prayer comes too late.

Feeding - and Finally Exposing - the Monster

Emilia unknowingly helps Iago's plot when she gives him Desdemona's dropped handkerchief. In doing so, she feeds the monster. Yet she ultimately destroys Iago's deception by exposing his treachery. By then, the truth can no longer undo the damage. Jealousy has killed Desdemona. Emilia's courage costs her life. Othello dies by suicide. Iago survives only to face punishment and torture.

At the root of this carnage is Othello's insecurity. Iago may guide him toward destruction, but Othello chooses to believe the worst. He allows himself to be cast adrift in self-doubt because he cannot accept that Desdemona's love might be genuine.

As Othello founders and sinks, he takes nearly everyone with him.

The Tragedy of Refusing to Believe

Shakespeare's Othello is a painfully sad example of doubt's poisonous effect upon free will. If Othello had continued to believe in Desdemona's goodness - if he had trusted her loyalty and accepted her unconditional love - he might have lived a happy and contented life.

That possibility is what makes the tragedy so unbearable. Othello does not lose happiness because it was beyond his reach. He possesses it and then destroys it. His fatal flaw allows the green-eyed monster to consume everything.

In the final analysis, Othello may demonstrate that faith and acceptance can sometimes be more important than a freedom of choice corrupted by fear. Whether that is true - and whether human beings ever exercise free will without being influenced by their deepest insecurities - remains an unanswered question in both Shakespeare's play and the human condition.